The Harmony of the Spheres

In the time of the Jubilee the writer Eliot Crane, who had been suffering from what he called 'brainstorms' of paranoid schizophrenia, had lunch with his wife, a young photo-journalist called Lucy Evans, in the Welsh town of R., where she was working on the local paper. He looked cheerful, and told her he was feeling fine, but tired, and would go to bed early. It was the paper's press night, so Lucy was late getting home to their hillside cottage; when she went upstairs Eliot wasn't in their bedroom. Assuming that he was sleeping in the spare room, so that she wouldn't disturb him, she went to bed.

An hour later Lucy woke up with a premonition of disaster and went without getting dressed to the door of the guest bedroom; which, taking a deep breath, she opened. Half a second later, she slammed it shut again, and slumped heavily to the floor. He had been ill for more than two years, and all she could think was *It's over.* When she started shivering she went back to bed and slept soundly until morning.

He had sucked on his shotgun and pulled the trigger. The weapon had belonged to his father, who had put it to the same use. The only suicide note Eliot left after perpetrating this final act of macabre symmetry was a meticulous account of how to clean and care for the

gun. He and Lucy had no children. He was thirty-two years old.

A week earlier, the three of us walked up a beacon hill in the Borders to see the Jubilee bonfires flowering along the spine of the country, garlanding the darkness. 'It doesn't mean a "good fire",' Eliot said, 'though I grant there's an element of that in the word. Originally it was a fire made of bones: the bones of dead animals but also, fee fi fo fum, human remains, the charred skeletons my dears of *yuman beans*.'

He had wild red hair and a laugh like an owl's hoot and was as thin as a witch's stick. In the firelight's bright shadow-theatre we all looked insane, so it was easier to discount his hollowed-out cheeks, the pantomime cockings of his eyebrows, the mad-sailor glitter in his eye. We stood close to the flames and Eliot told dread tales of local Sabbats, at which cloaked and urine-drinking sorcerers conjured devils up from Hell. We swigged brandy from his silver hip-flask and recoiled on cue. But he had met a demon once and ever since that day he and Lucy had been on the run. They had sold their haunted home, a tiny house in Portugal Place, Cambridge, and moved to the bleak, sheep-smelly Welsh cottage they named (with gallows humour) Crowley End.

It hadn't worked. As we shrieked at Eliot's ghost stories, we knew that the demon had traced the number on his car licence-plates, that it could call him any time on his unlisted telephone; that it had rediscovered his home address.

'You'd better come,' Lucy had called to say. 'They found him going the wrong way on the motorway, doing ninety, with one of those sleep-mask things over his eyes.' She had given up a lot for him, quitting her job on a London Sunday paper and settling for a hicksville gazette, because he was mad, and she needed to be close.

'Am I approved of at present?' I'd asked. Eliot had elaborated a conspiracy theory in which most of his friends were revealed to be agents of hostile powers, both Earthly and extra-terrestrial. I was an invader from Mars, one of many such dangerous beings who had sneaked into Britain when certain essential forms of vigilance had been relaxed. Martians had great gifts of mimicry, so they could fool yuman beans into believing they were beans of the same stripe, and of course they bred like fruit-flies on a pile of rotten bananas.

For more than a year, during my Martian phase, I had been unable to visit. Lucy would phone with bulletins: the drugs were working, the drugs were not

working because he refused to take them regularly, he seemed better as long as he did not try to write, he seemed worse because not writing plunged him into such deep depressions, he was passive and inert, he was raging and violent, he was filled with guilt and despair.

I felt helpless; as one does.

We became friends in my last year at Cambridge, while I was involved in an exhausting on-off love affair with a graduate student named Laura. Her thesis was on James Joyce and the French *nouveau roman*, and to please her I ploughed my way through *Finnegans Wake* twice, and most of Sarraute, Butor and Robbe-Grillet too. One night, seized by romance, I climbed out of the window of her flat in Chesterton Road, balanced precariously on the window-sill and refused to come back inside until she agreed to marry me. The next morning she rang her mother to break the news. After a long silence, Mummy said, 'I'm sure he's very nice, dear, but couldn't you find someone of, you know, your own kind?'

Laura was humiliated by the question. 'What do you mean, my own kind?' she yelled down the phone. 'A Joyce specialist? A person five feet and three inches tall? A woman?'

That summer, however, she got stoned at a wedding,

snatched the glasses off my face and snapped them in two, grabbed the wedding-cake knife to the consternation of the bride and groom, and told me that if I ever came near her again she'd slice me up and pass me round at parties. I blundered myopically away from her and more or less fell over another woman, a grey-eyed fellow-alien in granny glasses named Mala, who with a straight face offered to drive me home, 'since your optical capability is presently reduced'. I didn't discover until after we married that serious, serene Mala, non-smoking, non-drinking, vegetarian, drug-free, lonely Mala from Mauritius, the medical student with the Gioconda smile, had been propelled in my direction by Eliot Crane.

'He'd like to see you,' Lucy said on the phone. 'He seems less worried about Martians now.'

Eliot sat by an open fire with a red rug over his knees. 'Ahoo! The space fiend boyo!' he cried, smiling broadly and raising both arms above his head, half in welcome, half in pretend surrender. 'Will you sit down, old bug-eyed *bach*, and take a glass before you have your evil way with us?'

Lucy left us to ourselves and he spoke soberly and with apparent objectivity about the schizophrenia. It seemed hard to believe that he had just driven blind-

folded down a motorway against the traffic. When the madness came, he explained, he was 'barking', and capable of the wildest excesses. But in between attacks, he was 'perfectly normal'. He said he'd finally come to see that there was no stigma in accepting that one was mad: it was an illness like any other, *voilà tout*.

'I'm on the mend,' he said, confidently. 'I've started work again, the Owen Glendower book. Work's fine as long as I keep off the occult stuff.' (He was the author of a scholarly two-volume study of overt and covert occultist groups in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Europe, entitled *The Harmony of the Spheres*.)

He lowered his voice. 'Between ourselves, Khan, I'm also working on a simple cure for paranoid schizophrenia. I'm in correspondence with the best men in the country. You've no idea how impressed they are. They agree I've hit on something absolutely new, and it's just a matter of time before we come up with the goods.'

I felt suddenly sad. 'Look out for Lucy, by the way,' he whispered. 'She lies like a whore. And she listens in on me, you know. They give her the latest machines. There are microphones in the fridge. She hides them in the butter.'

Eliot introduced me to Lucy in a kebab house on Charlotte Street in 1971, and though I hadn't seen her for

ten years I recognised at once that we had kissed on the beach at Juhu when I was fourteen and she was twelve; and that I was anxious to repeat the experience. Miss Lucy Evans, the honey-blonde, precocious daughter of the boss of the famous Bombay Company. She made no mention of kisses; I thought she had probably forgotten them, and said nothing either. But then she reminisced about our camel-races on Juhu beach, and fresh coconut-milk, straight from the tree. She hadn't forgotten.

Lucy was the proud owner of a small cabin cruiser, an ancient craft that had once been a naval longboat. It was pointed at both ends, had a makeshift cabin in the middle and a Thorneycroft Handybilly engine of improbable antiquity which would respond to nobody's coaxings except hers. It had been to Dunkirk. She named it *Bougainvillaea* in memory of her childhood in Bombay.

I joined Eliot and Lucy aboard *Bougainvillaea* several times, the first time with Mala, but subsequently without her. Mala, now Doctor Mala, Doctor (Mrs) Khan, no less, the Mona Lisa of the Harrow Road Medical Centre, was repelled by that bohemian existence in which we did without baths and pissed over the side and huddled together for warmth at night, zipped into our quilted sacks. 'For me, hygiene-comfort are

Priority A,' said Mala. 'Let sleeping bags lie. I-tho will stay home with my Dunlopillo and WC.'

There was a trip we took up the Trent and Mersey Canal as far as Middlewich, then west to Nantwich, south down the Shropshire Union Canal, and west again to Llangollen. Lucy as skipper was intensely desirable, revealing great physical strength and a kind of boaty bossiness that I found very arousing. On this trip we had two nights alone, because Eliot had to return to Cambridge to hear a lecture by a 'top man from Austria' on the subject of the Nazis and the occult. We saw him off at Crewe station and then ate a bad meal in a restaurant with pretensions. Lucy insisted on ordering a bottle of rosé wine. The waitress stiffened contemptuously. 'The French for red, madam,' she bellowed, 'is *rouge*.'

Whatever it was, we drank too much of it. Later, aboard *Bougainvillaea*, we zipped our sleeping bags together and returned to Juhu beach. But at a certain moment she kissed my cheek, murmured 'Madness, love', and rolled over, turning her back on the too-distant past. I thought of Mala, my not-too-distant present, and blushed guiltily in the dark.

The next day, neither of us spoke of what had almost happened. *Bougainvillaea* arrived at a one-way tunnel at the wrong time; but Lucy didn't feel like waiting three hours for her right of way. She ordered me to go ahead with a torch along the narrow towpath inside the tunnel, while she brought the boat on behind me at a crawl. I had no idea what she'd do if we met anyone coming towards us, but my journey along the slippery, broken towpath required all my attention, and anyway, I was only the crew.

Our luck held; we emerged into the daylight. I had been wearing a white cricket sweater which was now bright red, stained indelibly by mud from the tunnel walls. There was mud in my shoes and in my hair and on my face. When I wiped my sweating forehead a lump of mud fell into my eye.

Lucy whooped in triumph at our illegal success. 'Made a lawbreaker of you at last, bloody wonderful,' she hollered. (As a youth, in Bombay, I had been notoriously Good.) 'You see? Crime does pay, after all.'

Madness. Love. I remembered the rosé and the tunnel when I heard about Eliot's high-speed escapade. Our adventures aboard *Bougainvillaea* by night and by day had been as dangerous, in their way. Forbidden embraces and a wrong-way journey in the dark. But we

weren't shipwrecked, and he wasn't killed. Just lucky. I suppose.

Why do we lose our minds?

'A simple biochemical imbalance,' was Eliot's view. He insisted on driving home from the Jubilee bonfire, and as he accelerated through blind corners on lightless country roads, various biochemicals surged, off-balance, through my veins as well. Then, without warning, he braked hard and stopped. It was a clear night with a moon. On the hillside to our right were sleeping sheep and a small fenced-off graveyard.

'I want to be buried here,' he announced.

'No can do,' I answered from the back seat. 'You'd have to be dead, you see.'

'Don't,' said Lucy. 'You'll only give him ideas.'

We were teasing him to conceal the quaking within, but Eliot knew we had registered the information. He nodded, satisfied; and accelerated.

'If you wipe us out,' I gasped, 'who'll be left to remember you when you're gone?'

When we got back to Crowley End he went straight to bed without a word. Lucy looked in on him a while later and reported that he'd fallen asleep fully clothed, and grinning. 'Let's get drunk,' she suggested brightly.

She stretched out on the floor in front of the fire.

'Sometimes I think everything would have been a lot easier if I hadn't rolled away,' she said. 'I mean, on the boat.'

Eliot met his demon for the first time when he was finishing *The Harmony of the Spheres*. He had quarrelled with Lucy, who had moved out of the doll's house in Portugal Place. (When she came back to him she found that in her absence he had not put out a single milk-bottle. The massed bottles stood in the kitchen, one for each day Lucy and Eliot had been apart, like seventy accusations.)

One night he woke at three a.m., convinced of the presence downstairs of something absolutely evil. (I remembered this premonition when Lucy told me how she woke up at Crowley End, certain that he was dead.)

He picked up his Swiss army knife and descended, stark naked (as Lucy would be naked, in her turn), to investigate. The electricity wasn't working. As he neared the kitchen he felt arctically cold and found that he had acquired an erection. Then all the lights went crazy, switching themselves on and off, and he made the sign of the cross with his arms and screamed, '*Apage me, Satanas.*' Get thee behind me, Satan.

'Whereupon everything went back to normal,' he told me. 'And, below decks, limp.'

'You didn't really see anything,' I said, slightly disappointed. 'No horns, or cloven hooves.'

Eliot was not the hyper-rationalist he claimed to be. His immersion in the dark arts was more than merely scholarly. But because of his brilliance, I took him at his own estimation. 'Just open-minded,' he said. 'More in heaven and earth, Horatio, and so forth.' He made it sound perfectly rational to sell a haunted house double-quick, even to lose money on the deal.

We were the most unlikely of friends. I liked hot weather, he preferred it grey and damp. I had a Zapata moustache and shoulder-length hair, he wore tweeds and corduroy. I was involved in fringe theatre, race relations and anti-war protests. He weekended on the country-house circuit, killing animals and birds. 'Nothing like it to cheer a fellow,' he said, winding me up. 'Blasting the life out of one's furry and feathered friends, doing one's bit for the food chain. Marvellous.' He gave a party the day after Edward Heath won the 1970 election – *Grocer Turns Cabinet Maker*, one newspaper declared – and mine was the only long face there.

Who knows what makes people friends? Something in the way they move. The way they sing off-key.

But in the case of Eliot and me, I do know, really. It was that old black magic. Not love, not chocolate: the Hidden Arts. If I find it impossible to let go of Eliot's memory, it is perhaps because I know that the seductive arcana which drove Eliot Crane out of his mind almost ensnared me as well.

Pentangles, illuminati, Maharishi, Gandalf: necromancy was part of the *zeitgeist*, of the private language of the counter-culture. From Eliot I learned the secrets of the Great Pyramid, the mysteries of the Golden Section and the intricacies of the Spiral. He told me about Mesmer's theory of Animal Magnetism (*A responsive influence exists between the heavenly bodies, the earth and all animated bodies. A fluid universally diffused, incomparably subtle, is the means of this influence. It is subject to mechanical laws with which we are not yet familiar*) and the Four Trances of Japanese spiritualism: *Muchu*, that is, ecstasy or rapture; *Shissi, Konsui-Jotai*, or a coma; *Saimin-Jotai*, a hypnotic state; and *Mugen no Kyo*, in which the soul can leave the body behind and wander in the World of Mystery. Through Eliot I met remarkable men, or at least their minds: G.I. Gurdjieff, author of *Beelzebub's Tales* and guru to, among others, Aldous Huxley, Katherine Mansfield and J.B. Priestley; and Raja Rammohun Roy and his

Brahmo Samaj, that brave attempt at making a synthesis of Indian and English thought.

Under my friend's informal tutelage, I studied numerology and palmistry and memorised an Indian spell for flying. I was taught the verses that conjured up the Devil, *Shaitan*, and how to draw the shape that would keep the Beast 666 confined.

I never had much time for gurus back home where the word came from, but that's what Eliot was, I confess with a blush. A mystical teacher in English translation; say it g'*roo*.

Reader: I flunked the course. I never experienced *Muchu* (much less *Mugen no Kyo*), never dared speak the Hell-raising spells, or jumped off a cliff, like some Yaquí *brujo*'s apprentice, to fly.

I survived.

Eliot and I practised putting each other under hypnosis. Once he implanted the post-hypnotic suggestion that if he should ever say the word 'bananas' I must at once remove all my clothes. That evening, on the dance-floor at Dingwall's club with Mala and Lucy, he whispered his fruity malice into my ear. Rumbling, sleep-inducing waves began to roll heavily over me and even though I tried hard to fight them back my hands began to undress

me. When they began unzipping my jeans we were all thrown out.

'You boys,' Mala said disapprovingly as I dressed by the canal, swearing loudly and threatening dire revenges. 'Maybe you should go to bed together and we-all can go home and get some rest.'

Was that it? No. Maybe. No. I don't know. *No*.

What a picture: a double portrait of self-deceivers. Eliot the occultist pretending to be an academic, with me, more prosaically, perhaps, half-lost in occult love.

Was that it?

When I met Eliot I was a little unhinged myself – suffering from a disharmony of my personal spheres. There was the Laura episode, and beyond it a number of difficult questions about home and identity that I had no idea how to answer. Eliot's instinct about Mala and me was one answer that I was grateful for. Home, like Hell, turned out to be other people. For me, it turned out to be her.

Not Martian, but Mauritian. She was a ninth-generation child of indentured labourers brought from India after the black exodus that had followed the end of slavery. At home – home was a small village to the north of Port Louis, and its largest edifice was a small white Vishnu temple – she and her family had spoken a

version of the Indian Bhojpuri dialect, so creolised over the years as to be virtually incomprehensible to non-Mauritian Indians. She had never been to India, and my birth and childhood and continued connections there made me, in her eyes, ridiculously glamorous, like a visitor from Xanadu. *For he on honey-dew hath fed, And drunk the milk of Paradise.*

Even though she was, as she put it, 'from science side', she was interested in writing, and liked the fact that I was trying to be a writer. She took pride in 'Romeo and Juliet of Mauritius', as she called Bernardin de St Pierre's *Paul et Virginie*; and insisted that I read it. 'Maybe it will influence,' she said, hopefully.

She had a doctor's unsqueamishness and practicality, and like all people 'from arts side' I envied her knowledge of what human beings were like on the inside. What I had to imagine about human nature, she gave every appearance of knowing. She wasn't a big talker, but I felt that in her I had found my rock. And the warm dark tides of the Indian Ocean rose nightly in her veins.

What angered her, it seemed, was Eliot, and my closeness to him. Once she was installed as my wife – we honeymooned in Venice – her unease prompted what was, for her, a major speech. 'All that mumboing and jumboing,' she snorted, full of science-side contempt for the Irrational. 'So phoney, God! Listen: he

comes round too much, it's bad for you. What is he? Some English mess-head, only. Get my drift, writer sahib? I mean, thanks for the intro etcetera, but now you should drop him, like a brick.'

'Welsh,' I said, very surprised. 'He's Welsh.'

'Doesn't matter,' snapped Doctor (Mrs) Khan. 'Diagnosis still applies.'

But in Eliot's enormous, generously shared mental storehouse of the varieties of 'forbidden knowledge' I thought I'd found another way of making a bridge between here-and-there, between my two othernesses, my double unbelonging. In that world of magic and power there seemed to exist the kind of fusion of world-views, European Amerindian Oriental Levantine, in which I desperately wanted to believe.

With his help, I hoped, I might make a 'forbidden self'. The apparent world, all cynicism and napalm, seemed wholly without kindness or wisdom. The hidden realm, in which Sufis walked with Adepts and great secrets could be glimpsed, would show me how to be wise. It would grant me – Eliot's favourite word, this – harmony.

Mala was right. He couldn't help anyone, the poor sap; couldn't even save himself. In the end his demons came

for him, his Gurdjieff and Ouspensky and his Crowley and Blavatsky, his Dunsany and his Lovecraft long ago. They crowded out the sheep on his Welsh hillside, and closed in on his mind.

Harmony? You never heard such a din as the ruckus in Eliot's head. The songs of Swedenborg's angels, the hymns, the mantras, the Tibetan overtone chants. What human mind could have defended itself against such a Babel, in which Theosophists argued with Confucians, Christian Scientists with Rosicrucians? Here were devotees praising the coming of Lord Maitreya; there, blood-sucking wizards hurling curses. And lo, there came forth Millenarians crying Doom; and behold, Hitler arose brandishing his fylfot, which in his ignorance or malignity he gave the name of the symbol of good: *swastika*.

In the throng besieging the sick man of Crowley End even my personal favourite, Raja Rammohun Roy, was just another voice in the cacodemonic crowd.

Bang!

And, at last, silence. *Requiescat in pace.*

By the time I got back to Wales, Lucy's brother Bill had called the police and undertakers and had spent heroic hours in the spare room cleaning the blood and brains

off the walls. Lucy sat sipping gin in the kitchen in a light summer frock, looking dreadfully composed.

'Would you go through his books and papers?' she asked me, sounding sweet and distant. 'I can't do it. There may be enough of the Glendower thing. Someone could pull it into shape.'

It took me the best part of a week, that sad excavation of my dead friend's unpublished mind. I felt a page turning; I was just starting to be a writer then, and Eliot had just stopped being one. Although in truth, as I found, he had stopped being one years ago. There was no trace of a Glendower manuscript, or any serious work at all. There were only ravings.

Bill Evans had stuffed three tea-chests with Eliot's typed and scribbled papers. In these chests of delirium I found hundreds of pages of operatic, undirected obscenities and inchoate rants against the universe in general. There were dozens of notebooks in which Eliot had dreamed up alternative personal futures of extraordinary distinction and renown, or, alternatively, self-pitying versions of a life of genius-in-obscurity ending in agonising illnesses, or assassination by jealous rivals; after which, inevitably, came recognition by a remorseful world of the greatness it had ignored. These were sorry reams.

Harder still to read were his fantasies about us, his friends. These were of two kinds: hate-filled, and pornographic. There were many virulent attacks on me, and pages of steamy sex involving my wife Mala, 'dated', no doubt to maximise their auto-erotic effect, in the days immediately after our marriage. And, of course, at other times. The pages about Lucy were both nasty and lubricious. I searched the tea-chests in vain for a loving remark. It was hard to believe that such a passionate and eager man could have nothing good to say about life on earth. Yet it was so.

I showed Lucy nothing, but she saw it all on my face. 'It wasn't really him writing,' she consoled me mechanically. 'He was sick.'

And I know what made him sick, I thought; and vowed silently to remain well. Since then there has been no intercourse between the spiritual world and mine. Mesmer's 'influential fluid' evaporated for ever as I plunged through the putrid tea-chests of my friend's mad filth.

Eliot was buried according to his wishes. The manner of his dying had created some difficulties regarding the use of consecrated ground, but Lucy's fury had persuaded the local clergy to turn a blind eye.

Among the mourners was a Conservative Member

of Parliament who had been at school with Eliot. 'Poor Elly,' this man said in a loud voice. 'We used to ask ourselves, "*Whatever will become of Elly Crane?*" And I'd say, "*He'll probably make something half-way decent of his life, if he doesn't kill himself first.*" '

This gentleman is presently a member of the Cabinet, and receives Special Branch protection. I don't think he realises how close he came to needing protection (against me) on a sunny morning in Wales long ago.

But his epitaph is the only one I remember.

At the moment of our parting Lucy gave me her hand to shake. We didn't see each other again. I heard that she had remarried quickly and dully and gone to live in the American West.

Back home, I found that I needed to talk for a long time. Mala sat and listened sympathetically. Eventually I told her about the tea-chests.

'You worked him out, no need to remind me,' I cried. 'You knew his insides. Imagine! He was so sick, so crazy, that he fantasised all these frenzied last-tango encounters with you. For instance, just after we got home from Venice. For instance, in those two days I was alone with Lucy on *Bougainvillaea*, and he said he had to go to Cambridge for a lecture.'

Mala stood up and turned her back on me, and

before she spoke I guessed her answer, feeling it explode in my chest with an unbearable raucous crack, a sound reminiscent of the break-up of log-jams or pack-ice. Yes, she had warned me against Eliot Crane, warned me with the bitter passion of her denunciation of him; and I, in my surprise at the denunciation, had failed to hear the real warning, failed to understand what she had meant by the passion in her voice. *That mess-head. He's bad for you.*

So, here it came: the collapse of harmony, the demolition of the spheres of my heart.

'Those weren't fantasies,' she said.

CHEKOV AND ZULU